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A

SERMON,

PREACHED TO

THE FIRST CHURCH,

BY ITS MINISTER

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N. L. FROTHINGHAM,

ON

THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

OF

HIS ORDINATION,

MARCH 15, 1835.

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SERMON.

GENESIS XXXI. 28.

This twenty years have I been with thee.

LIFE goes forward in its steady progress. The years go round in their swift circles. And the lines of these curving periods cut here and there the line of our straight march, in a way to admonish and affect us. The anniversaries of events that have been of lasting consequence to us return with a solemn frequency. It is impossible to record them with any care, and not be stirred with a strange mixture of painful and pleasant remembrances ;.....pleasant or painful, equally serious because they are remembrances only. What distressed us is gone, but has cast a shade behind it. What delighted us is gone also, and its shade is all that is left. To reckon by eras of anxiety and labour....is not that the lot of man ? Or if it be with nothing to labour for, and nothing worth the reckoning,....is not that a worse lot still ?

It is just twenty years to day since I came among you as your servant in the christian ministry. In saying

this, I am conscious of mentioning what most of you would not remember unless thus reminded of it. I am aware that there may be few, to whom it will seem a subject of any peculiar concern. I feel too in full force the difficulty and the peril of speaking of one's self; especially in a place and a connexion like this, where personal considerations should be forgotten, and the individual is nothing, and religious truth and religious affections should be alone regarded. But you will bear with me. Although it should be "in my folly," as an apostle once said, you would "indeed bear with me"; for you must have been called to do this often during so long a course of services, of which no one feels so deeply the imperfectness as he who has tried to render them; where the wish and ambitiousness have been stronger than the ability, and the pains-taking has been greater than the success.

It is not chiefly of himself, however, that the preacher on such an occasion is required to speak. It is not only of himself that it is possible for him to think. For whatever he has passed through has been in intimate connexion with you and yours. What has been of most interest to him has been the events, in which yourselves have had principal concern. His thoughts, which must always pass for leading events in the lives of those whose profession it is to exercise the thoughts, have been tasked for your use and often suggested by your trials. The great scene of his cares and recollections has been here; in the assemblies that you and they who went before you helped to form,

and in your homes that have been altered so much since he first saw them. It is of you then and not of himself that he speaks. You have an interest in what he is going to say ; he could not, if he would, separate his feelings from the natural partnership that they claim with your own.

Those twenty years ! We look back upon them....such of us as have been together from the beginning,....and marvel that, containing so much as they did of joy and affliction, revealing so much as they do of the changes that have marked themselves round us and upon us, they have departed so soon. How many images of those who are estranged from us, and those who are lost to us, are reflected from the broad mirror of those far-off days ! How many scenes of distress ! How many scattered families ! How many houses left desolate ! During all that long stretch of time your griefs have been my discomforts ; your bereavements have been my losses ; your call has been my necessity ; your good opinion has been a motive of constant solicitude and one round of toil. Your sick and your dead begin to range themselves before me as I speak, a procession of sorrows. The choking recollections of old sympathies come up as distinctly as if the events were of yesterday. My thoughts are overwhelmed with the review of sufferings in mind and heart, which would never have been incurred could they but once have been foreseen.

But I do not stand here to complain. I have no cause of complaint, unless perhaps of inadequateness to a service,

that will often appear to be as thankless as it is hard. Certainly none against any one of the assembly here present, friends and well-wishers all. There come indeed trials of another sort than any that have been named, if one's best endeavours are lightly set by ; being met with easy dislikes and repaid with discourtesies.

You may be surprised at this earnestness. Perhaps it should be less. Perhaps it should be repressed wholly. Perhaps not even the excitement of the retrospect we are making will vindicate it from the censure of being unreasonable. You will have to forgive it then. It is neither a rhetorical artifice nor a transient emotion ; but only a little expression of an overcharged fulness, that must thus once for all find relief.

" This twenty years have I been with thee ;" a large part of the life of each one of you, of mine its best part. Let us return to the subject, and enter upon it with something of method. Let us take up first the doctrine of this church of Christ during that period ; then offer a few words upon the practice of the church, so far as it has been in any degree peculiar ; and conclude with a general glance at the events that have taken place in its variable community.

First, then, of the doctrine of this church. We have one ;—though it is not fixed in set articles, nor inclosed in any forms, even silver and golden ones, of human device. We have one ;—though it takes that freedom of range, which suits the only boundless theme of the illimitable

soul. We have one;—though we are not anxious to define it over closely, nor to mark the deviations from any formulary that any may have prescribed. We have one; —though it is afloat on the sea of truth, and we dare not say that there will be the same bearings to the land and the same aspects of the sky from year to year. We allow ourselves to be in motion with any improvement that will set us really forward. Enough for us, that we are in the sound bark of the old apostles of Galilee though upon an unstable element, and that we are guided by the eternal stars. Without a figure; we will not attempt to bind others, and we will not consent to bind ourselves, to think the same thoughts through all generations; but we hold by the teaching of Christ and his disciples; leaving ourselves free to enlarge its interpretation as God shall give us light. We do not dictate. We do not submit to man's dictation.

It is just twenty years ago that the great controversy broke out in the churches of this neighbourhood, which has severed their ancient intercourse. It has nearly or quite exhausted itself by this time; for the dispute has become wearisome, both to those who engaged in it and those who looked on. But it has left enduring traces of its convulsion behind it. It is known by the name of the Unitarian controversy; and in so naming it I believe that I am giving utterance for the first time in this desk to that party word. This alone is saying not a little in illustration of the spirit, with which the offices of

religion have been here conducted. We understood one another and were agreed, but did not interfere with the conscientious belief of any, or show ourselves hostile to them. We remained almost at rest in that earthquake of schism. If we were sometimes affected by the agitating topics of the time, it was not often. If any discourses pronounced from this place were ever tinctured by the slightest bitterness of polemical divinity, they are those which would be remembered with too little satisfaction to have any danger of being renewed. Our words have been of brotherly love and mutual consideration. We silently assumed the ground, or rather found ourselves already standing upon it, that there was no warrant in the scriptures for the idea of a threefold personality in the divine nature; or for that of atonement, according to the popular understanding of that word; or for that of man's total corruption and inability; or for that of an eternity of wo adjudged as the punishment of earthly offences; or indeed for any of the peculiar articles in that scheme of faith which went under the name of the Genevan reformer. We have worshipped only One, the Father. We have recognized the authority of Jesus Christ as a divine messenger. We have maintained the accountability of man, and a righteous retribution, and a life beyond this. But in all these points, we were adopting rather practical principles and a ground of edifying than tenets to be discussed. We have never pretended to understand all mysteries, nor to solve every question that a vain curiosity might propose. We

have not sought to penetrate to what is beyond us ; but have been content to leave many things in that sacred obscurity, in which they are left by the written word. And even upon subjects within the range of reasonable inquiry, we have not favoured a controversial tone. We have made more account of the religious sentiment than of theological opinions.

Such is a summary account of the views that we have approved respecting doctrines.

Secondly. The practice of this church, especially in regard to topics of general interest in the community, and those movements which will at intervals arise and assume a great transient importance, offers itself next for our consideration. Has this practice, a stranger might inquire, been in any degree peculiar ? It has, and steadily peculiar. We have been singularly conservative in our customs ; mistrustful of innovations, jealous of our liberty, fond of peace, refusing to be influenced by any gustiness of the times. We have loved to dwell within ourselves, and disliked to implicate our concerns with those of other churches, or with any associations of men. These dispositions have in some sort characterised our religious society for at least the fifth part of a century. I found them here, and felt in entire accordance with them. We have carried them out as yet, through circumstances that have put them to a severe test, with a tenaciousness that has doubtless appeared to some like indifference and to others like obstinacy. We have been unexcited by

surrounding fervours. We have been inactive, when the general cry has been, What shall we do next? We have thought, with the prophet, that our "strength was to sit still," while many were sending for help from all the borders of Egypt. We have been ready to suspect that there might be more motion than progress in what was called the march of the age; and that the "running to and fro" was more certain, than that "knowledge was increased." We have been unwilling to take part, therefore, in enterprizes, that have found unbounded favour with a large number of our friends. We have supposed, that the exclusive objects of our association were to worship our Maker according to our consciences, and to maintain the sacred decency of christian order. We have therefore been unwilling to mix up these objects with plans of a different, however important nature. We have been unwilling to take the stand of missionaries or propagandists in any shape. We have been unwilling to form ourselves into a bible society, or a temperance or an education or a benevolent society; or to appear as any thing else than what we are, a church of Christ, an assembly for social worship. We wish to preserve ourselves thus distinct. We love to be aloof from the zealous strivings of the day. We have said to "colonization" and "abolition," those struggling and clashing projects, which have flamed out into so much notoriety, that they may be thus elliptically spoken of in a single word, without any danger of being misunderstood,....we have said to them both, Whatever

may be our private opinion of you, we will give you no seat in our holy places. And this is but a single specimen of the spirit, in which you have always been united. You stand almost alone in declining to be a member of the consociated fraternity of your neighbourhood ; in feeling and in judgment indeed less lonely than in your act. The course that you took on this point, with the utmost unanimity and in resistance to no unattractive examples, will perhaps recommend itself more and more, as we observe the aspects of the times, and look at the new designs that are continually starting out into a hasty and spasmodic life. Your minister is almost alone in having never given his name to the great organization of what may be called his party ; and it is one of the last circumstances that it would occur to him to regret.

All this is from no indifference, from no timid reluctance, from no love of our ease ; but because we are persuaded that, for us at least, there is wisdom in it. We are frequently called to witness the ascendency which the last organized novelty acquires over the public mind ; affecting an importance that does not belong to it, and absorbing an attention that it does not deserve, and sometimes even casting a shade of discontent and reproach over the old means of improvement and the ordinary services of the Lord's house. We think we see reason to fear, lest so many forcing processes should allow nothing to come to its natural perfection ; lest so much mechanism should produce a generation of machines rather than true

spirits; lest there should be first shallowness and then drought; lest a period of busy pretensions should have for its successor a season of hypocrisy or deadness.

There has very lately gone abroad an impulse, that one is tempted to call feverish, on the subject of the religious education of children. It is said that little is done in the way of direct address to this most important part of the community, and that something must be done speedily. It is discovered that the church is but a barren and wearisome place for them. Even the Sunday school, which a year or two ago was thought to be such a miracle of advancement, when in truth it was only a very useful and pleasant institution in a sphere somewhat subordinate, begins now to be accounted extremely inadequate to the wants of the case. We hear much of making children the objects of especial addresses; and even of sending them to chapels of their own, where the services will be adapted exclusively to their capacities and their benefit. I cannot feel the necessity that is thus complained of. I cannot discern the use of what is thus proposed. So far from it, this new craving seems to me unreasonable; this new view extremely short-sighted; and this new procedure, if it were as practicable as it is utterly visionary, full of the most serious mischiefs that have yet beguiled our churches. Children should come to worship with their parents and elders, if they have any such to make them their charge. By the mother's side, and under the father's eye, is the true place for them. They should bend their young heads in company with those whose brows

are but thinly covered now with the gray locks of their age. They should be under the solemn influences of the general sanctuary. They should listen to the word that is addressed to all, the small and the great together. They should not be singled out, to be made vain, or to be made difficult. They should receive the word as they can bear it, with an effort to add to what they learn, and with the humility that will be their best learning.

But an objector may say, they are not interested in the usual exercises of the Lord's day. Perhaps so. Perhaps it is hardly to be expected that in the greater number of instances it should be otherwise. But why will you break up the steady habits, by which alone they can be trained to take an interest in those exercises? Why will you create in their minds the very distaste that you lament? Why will you gratify their love of variety at an age when they most require to be fixed; and when every novelty, especially if it flatters the natural love of distinction, has an irresistible charm? We may be told further, that they do not understand the sermons and the religious offices, in which we statedly engage. We may grant this cheerfully. It is best that it should be so. I would not have it otherwise. The whole method of the Divine Providence in the teaching of our generations declares that it shall not be otherwise. Preaching that never goes beyond the compass of a child's taste and comprehension, will be as worthless even to him, when considered in its whole effects, as it is to every one else. I would not, if it could be done, spread out the deep waters of truth into a shallow

ford, that could be crossed by an infant's foot. It is the sentiment of veneration, that I would impress upon the tender hearts of the young. That is the great thing. It is every thing. It is worth all the excitement that could ever be kindled. It is worth all the information that it would be possible to impart. I am jealous for this principle of reverence ; lest it should be impaired by the assiduous lessons,....however piously meant and however amusingly conveyed,....of religion made easy. Let the instruction be somewhat above them, that they may look up. Let it be somewhat hidden, that they may search and wonder. Let them grow to the truth. Let them see as much to stand in awe at in its solemn mysteries,.....at least as I do. Understand ! I am almost weary of the word, when applied as it often is to that mighty theme, in which the first step is the idea of the Infinite God. Fathers and mothers ! come to the church yourselves, and bring your children with you. Let them sit by you on the same seats. Let them hear the same word that you do, however imperfectly it may be spoken.

An account has thus been presented of what our course has been with respect to practice for the last twenty years. What it will be for the next term of the same length, it is neither for me to prescribe nor for you to foresee. You will not lightly change it. If you ever see cause to change, may it be for a greater advantage than any that I can anticipate.

Thirdly. Something was to be said, in conclusion, of the events of the period which has just ended. There

are none, that must not be traced in outline merely and with the most general hand. But on the heart of many, many an individual among you, they have left uneffaceable records. It is a length of time, that gives space for much to be endured. It must needs have wrought out many alterations in our persons and our homes. Only about forty of the families that invited and placed me here have left even a descendant to continue their name among us. What a troop of shadows would assemble themselves, if all those who have since worshipped with us and died from us could at this moment re-appear ! Of the ministers of our own denomination who then served the churches in this town, only three remain ;* and of those who were appointed over all the other congregations, of every name, not a man is left. Several of the churches have changed their teachers many times. Meanwhile, the little boy has grown a strong man. The water of baptism upon the forehead of the infant girl has been exchanged for the marriage veil. Large families have sprung up, where were only the bridegroom and the bride; and families that were then numerous have been scattered, or diminished, or quite cut down. Many a change of fortune, many of repute, many of character and heart, has marked itself on the way we have come. Many an entire term of probation, from the first fulness of intellect and public starting place of trial to a dying day, has completed its career.

Let me go back to the text, in order to throw off some

* Rev. Drs. Channing, Lowell, and Parkman.

of the painful recollections that press upon me. "This twenty years have I been with thee." These were the words of Jacob to Laban. They were spoken at a jealous parting. They were spoken in the temper of fault-finding and reproach. With nothing resembling that situation or that temper are they repeated to day ; but on the contrary with feelings of perfect confidence and cordiality, as well as a thankful recognition of the goodness of God. I rejoice that we have walked together with such a spirit of concert. You have not been the hard exactor that Laban the Syrian was to the Jewish patriarch. You have been true and indulgent. You have shown instances of your good will, that shall not now be named but are none the less treasured up in a grateful remembrance.

To the recently afflicted among you I send a sorrow, that goes forth from my own heart to meet theirs. To those whose circumstances in life have been deeply shaded by the passage of the last twenty years, I offer my sympathizing recollections. To the young I ask the privilege of rendering whatever counsel and encouragement I may be able to bestow. To those who have long ceased to be young I would express the anxious wish, that "as their days so may their strength be." Upon this whole Israel of ours may that heavenly benediction descend, which is not limited by any seasons or times ! And when these courts of the Lord shall be tenantless, may a great multitude of those who sat in them be sharers, around diviner altars, in the services of the ransomed and glorified !